69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
Moi AM9
M'nong

and we were down to the nursing-mothers, who, removing their babies from the breast and passing them to onlookers, tripped lightly towards us. Although the rice-alcohol, with its queer burnt-cereal taste, was weaker than usual, my friends said, it was beginning to take effect. The Moïs had slipped into an easy-going joviality and the nursing-mothers received some mild familiarities, for which they exchanged good-natured slaps. Their capacity for alcohol, though, was greater than that of the elder ladies, and they were not to be deceived by a mere pretence of drinking on our part. Calling for beakers they sucked up the alcohol, spat libations, syphoned off liquor until the beakers were filled, and presented them to us. Taking stock of the situation we saw that we had drunk our way to within two nursing-mothers of those perfect young representatives of the Polynesian race, the chief's daughters, who flung us occasional glances from between sweeping lashes. But we were all flagging, dizzy with the alcohol and the stunning reverberation of the gongs. And the morning was wearing on. It would have been difficult to imagine our condition by the time we had drunk our way down to an interesting social level. The Moïs encouraged us with smiles and gestures, but we could do no more.

It was at a village in the vicinity of Buon Dieo, where two years previously an extraordinary affair had taken place. A family of eight persons were suspected of magic practices to the detriment of the village. According to local custom a representative was chosen as accuser and a trial by ordeal arranged. This consisted of the villagers' champion and the head of the accused family plunging their heads under water, the first to withdraw his head, in this case the accused, being held to have lost the day. According to the rulings of customary law governing this rather unusual case the charged persons were found to be possessed by certain minor demons, located in each case in a bodily organ. The general attitude thus was a sympathetic one. The prisoners were regarded

69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
Laotians AM8

acknowledge in the street a lady with whom one happens to be on particularly good terms. These things in Laos are fraught with an etiquette which is the legacy of a highly organized society not too far gone in decay.

The charm of Vientiane lies in the life and the customs of the people. Unless one is an amateur of pagoda architecture there is little else to be seen. The Laotians have preferred to work in wood, rather than stone, and their art, confined chiefly to the decoration by religious artists of the doors, pillars and interiors of pagodas, quickly perishes in such a climate.

Outside the town there is a great, grey, half-decayed *stupa*, built as a tomb for a hair of the Buddha. It is surrounded by a cloister, containing perhaps a thousand Buddha images; a collection of which the people of Vientiane are very proud. But even here, where the religion is practised in its purest form, there is a little degeneration, a little backsliding from the lofty philosophic conception; and the taint of magic practices shows itself. Selecting one of the numerous images as a personal tutelary divinity, the devotee subjects it to a kind of bribery similar to that sometimes practised in Southern Europe with images of the saints. In this case the image's chief function is healing, and when the sufferer recovers from any complaint he hastens to the pagoda to apply gold-leaf to the part of the Buddha corresponding to that where he has felt the pain in his own body. I was interested to deduce from this practice that the people of Vientiane are much plagued by headaches – perhaps those which accompany malaria.

Standing in a corner of the sanctuary was an ancient ithyphallic statue, an old Hindu divinity, no doubt, which had been worn smooth in the appropriate parts by the feminine adoration of a thousand years. I was told that the women of the French colony who wish for a child frequently emulate their husbands' pose of Laos-ization by coming here secretly to pay their respects. I wondered whether this clandestine tribute might not be extended

as a blessing.

One fact worthy of note is that the "Phi-pop"--men, women and even adolescents--are extremely intelligent folk with lively eyes and full of a strong will and energy. They know [Illustration here] a host of recipes and therapeutic formulas which have been handed down to them by their parents. They might be described as bonesetters or people who have medicine as a sideline, and who act on weak minds and nervous temperaments by the power of suggestion. "Phi-pop" women and girls are usually quite pretty.

One of the methods most widely used to gain the favor of the "Phis" is to play deafening music.

"It is not at all unusual to hear diabolic and uninterrupted music in a Laotian house for several days and nights running. In this house there is a person who is seriously ill. All the noise is designed to frighten or to assuage the spirit in the sick person's body and to persuade or force it to [153] leave the body of the invalid. The sick person generally succumbs under the waves of this curative but noisy harmony" (1).

(1) Le Laos français, op. cit. [Lieutenant-colonel Tournier (Superior Resident in Laos), "Notice sur le Laos français," in Revue Indochinoise, Hanoi, 1900.]

Religion of the Thais. They have neither pagodas nor bonzes, but practice ancestor worship and have a great veneration for the "Spirits or Genii," to whom they make offerings on all occasions.

In the first room of the house there stands a bamboo altar. The "Spirits" or "Phis" of dead forbears are supposed to inhabit this altar, which is composed of two different levels, the highest one for the male Phis and the other for the female Phis. At its foot there is an opening covered with an elliptical wooden ornament shaped like a mouth. It is there, on this "ancestors' mouth," that the head of the family places offerings and prayers, especially when a member of the family is sick. In principal an animal is never killed without some scrap of food or a few drops of blood being offered to the ancestors' mouth.

"Spirits, whether genii or demons, are everywhere--in the sky, on earth, in the forests, in the water. They are the object of a widespread cult over which individuals who might be described as

776 lay priests preside. These lay priests, or rather these servants of the
793 Spirits, correspond to the Guardians of the Genii in the Buddhist
755 religion. Usually they exercise their ministry only when one of their countrymen falls sick or dies.

"In case of a serious illness the servant of the Spirits goes to the sick person's house, goes to his side and recites a few prayers. Then he takes a bowl of uncooked rice on which he stands an egg with the smallest end upwards. With his right hand the officiant drops a certain number of grains of rice on the point of the egg, performing this operation three times in all. If the same number of grains of rice remain on the point of the egg each time, this means that a "Spirit" has entered the sick person's body.

787 "By means of similar maneuvers, the Spirit is then questioned to find out what he wants to eat. Depending on the answer, a buffalo, an ox or a pig may be killed. The designated animal is slaughtered and then scorched without being skinned so as to destroy the hairs which cover it. The entrails are taken out and carefully washed [154] in running water, then replaced in the animal's body. The victim is taken to the altar of the Spirits, which is located outside the village, and placed with its head towards the altar. Then prayers are said asking the Spirit to cure the sick person. When the ceremony is over the animal is taken back to the village, where it is cut into pieces and divided among all the inhabitants. The invalid rarely gets well.

"There are also sorcerers and witches among the Thais, who are consulted in circumstances of lesser importance.

[775] "The Thais believe in metempsychosis, although their ideas on the subject are not very clear" (1).

(1) Le Laos français, op. cit. [Lieutenant-colonel Tournier (Superior Resident in Laos), "Notice sur le Laos français," in Revue Indochinoise, Hanoi, 1900.]

771 Religion of the Khas. Among the Khas, even those who practice
782 Buddhism, the only existing religion is a religion of "Phis" which is
776 similar to the Thai belief in "Spirits, Genii and Demons." The outer manifestations of this cult consist of offerings of rice, flowers and fruit, but never include sacrifices of animals. Small shelters which affect the form of an ordinary house are built at the entrance to villages to receive propitiatory offerings destined for the "Phi".

"symbol" and the last vestige of an ancient usage, for the rockets can only set a few handfuls of straw afire. The wives and children of the deceased, all in great mourning costume, that is to say entirely clothed in white cotton goods, came and prostrated themselves before the Governor of the province, presented him with a platter of flowers and wax candles and asked him whether the King, "the master of life," had given permission for the cremation to take place and whether, for this purpose, he had sent "fire" from Luang-Prabang.

The Governor gave the fire to the dead man's relatives and then, in giving permission to cremate, he delivered an address which may be translated as follows:

[212] "The Tiao-Muong of Pak-Lay has been a good and just man during his life. He has never committed perjury. We may hope, together with his numerous family, that his Phi (soul) will be taken by the Thévada (angels) to the Spaces and there be presented to the holy Buddhas, Phra-Pouthi-Tiao, Phra-Tama-Tiao and Phra-Sang-Kha-Tiao, who will take him with them to Paradise to stay for a while. Then, at the time of rebirth, his Phi will again be incarnated in the body of a just, good and happy man who will have all the goods which are to be desired and a numerous progeniture."
[Illustration here]

The songs and music stopped during this speech, but they began again with new zest when the Governor of the province approached the pyre and set fire to the four corners. He was immediately followed and imitated by the family, the bonzes, the officials and the spectators. All without exception insisted on contributing fire, either with wax candles, resinous torches, dry bamboo or firebrands, or else with whole boxes of matches [213] or even with mere handfuls of dry grass which they had uprooted.

A thick, suffocating black smoke reeking of kerosene and resin rose up and enveloped the catafalque, and then a few tongues of flame shot forth. The evening wind was beginning to be felt and cleared the smoke somewhat. The flames grew hotter and finally hid the catafalque. A backward rush began, for the heat was far too intense and forced the spectators to move away from the [Illustration here] pyre. Only a few men armed with green bamboo poles remained nearby, seared by the fire but attentive and anxious, for someone had to see whether the coffin would lean to the right side, that is to say in the direction of Luang-Prabang, the residence of the King from whence "the fire" came. With a sudden crackling

include all the local genii one comes across in Indochina, either under the name of Neak Ta in Cambodia, or Phi in Laos, to mention only two countries. The cult of the Phi is still very much alive in Laos, although it has long been contested by the Buddhist clergy and forbidden by an edict of Phothisarath in 1527.

[30] But there are several classes of phi. First of all there are the universal phi, those are the ones which Buddhist tradition has attempted to assimilate for better or worse.

The book of Khun Bolom says precisely that the Phi Fa (Phi of heaven) and the Phi Then are in reality Indra, and the guardians of the four worlds. The Phi Sua Muon are Nang Tholani (Dharani, goddess of the earth) and Nang Mekhala (Manimekhala, deity of the sea). Finally there is the Phi Then Ten (Visvakarman, the builder).

The local protecting genii of the kingdom of Lan Xan are the fifteen Nagaraja (Praya Nak) who are the genii of water, living in the river rapids, at the confluence of rivers, on the rocks on the river banks or in caves. Their natural form is that of a serpent, but they can also take on human form.

Then follow the familiar genii, the wandering phi (Phi Pho), and the phi of dwellings (Phi Heuan). The Phi Heuan are honored at the time of marriage, and the Laotian code prescribes the indemnities which must be paid to please the Phi. There are also the phi of parents [or relatives--Translator] (Phi Me). These are often confused with the preceding ones. Their cult is celebrated either inside the house, or outside in a small shelter built for this purpose. This little structure is usually built leaning against a tree; sometimes it contains a small statuette or a stone, or even nothing. In that case one finds only a few grains of glutinous rice, and one or two small sticks of incense in a horn made of a banana leaf. This little house is the home of the Phi. He watches the living from the beyond and manifests himself every time a member of the family behaves badly. His intervention is most often known by a sudden and serious illness. One must then try to find out what has displeased the phi. For this one goes to the "sorcerer" and he will indicate [31] the sacrifice which must be made to the phi to appease his anger."

There exist also village phi to whom honor and offerings are due at the time of every ritual or local ceremony, particularly about the seventh month. Coinciding with a sort of pause in the ordinary activity of the Laotian, a pause which is regulated by a change in season, return of the rains and the rise of the Mekong waters, the feasts of the "months of the spirits" are centered around the evocation

775 According to the normal cycle of rebirths, when they have ended their stay in Heaven and are on the point of returning to earth, they themselves choose their future parents.

All the thirty-two souls go and haunt the water jar of the adopted household. After the third night, at the moment when the future father comes for a drink, they insinuate themselves into the folds of the belt of his sarong. After remaining there for three nights they will enter the maternal womb by the natural passages at the time of conjugal intercourse.

755 782 When one of these wandering souls leaves the body in order to divert himself, the man becomes ill. In order to [49] cure him, the soul must be called back, and then the Sou Khouan is performed.

When the Sou Khouan is considered necessary, the master of the house goes and consults an achar (pronounced: atiar = sk. acarya), an aged bonze, for the choice of the ceremonial days and hours, where this achar will officiate.

When the prescribed moment arrives, the pha khouan (tray containing offerings) must be ready. In the center of the tray is a goblet artistically decorated with small flowering branches on which are attached tiny candles and white cotton threads about twenty centimeters long. Around this goblet are arranged a boiled hen's egg called khay khouan (egg offered to the spirits), some pellets of glutinous rice, cakes, and ripe bananas.

The tray and goblet may be of wood, copper or silver, the richest appearing at weddings. Instead of a single goblet, several of different sizes can be placed one on top of the other to form a pyramid, and be decorated with flowers, candles and cotton threads.

In addition to the eatables already mentioned, one can also place on the tray a ngeun fac (ancient silver coin in the shape of a parallelepiped weighing 225 grams) or some other precious object.

Next to this tray is placed a small one on which is set a yellow-clawed cock which has been plucked, drawn and boiled. This is the khay khouan (the cock offered to souls). In addition one can add the head and viscera of a boiled pig.

[273] The whole is completed with a bottle of [rice] alcohol and some glasses. In the olden days, the alcohol was contained in a small natural gourd, and the cups [50] were made of bamboo or wood. But rich people had porcelain utensils imported from China. The alcohol can be replaced by a jar of fermented glutinous rice, the liquid extract of which is drunk by sucking it through bamboo tubes dipped into the bottom of the jar.